



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION SERVICES *A HEALTHCARE SERVICE AGENCY*

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GOVERNOR

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COMMISSIONER

Memorandum:

TO: Judiciary Committee

FROM: Michael Norko, M.D.
Director of Forensic Services

DATE: March 24, 2009

SUBJECT: **H.B. 6708, An Act Concerning Criminal Cases of Persons who have Returned from Service with the Armed Forces**

Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on **H.B. 6708, An Act Concerning Criminal Cases of Persons Who have Returned from Service with the Armed Forces**. This bill would create a new state-funded program in competition with an extensive program currently in active development that is funded by the federal government.

In October of 2008 DMHAS was awarded a \$2 million, 5-year grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, to establish a jail diversion program for veterans struggling with trauma-related symptoms. This grant builds upon the successes of DMHAS' existing statewide jail diversion infrastructure, which includes programming across all 20 geographic area courts. The grant requires the first-year piloting of jail diversion efforts in one region of the state, with statewide replication to follow. In that the southeast region is home to the Groton Naval Sub-Base, Camp Rell, the Stone Ranch Training Facility, a VA Veterans Readjustment and Counseling Center, and the busiest VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic in the state, the Norwich-New London area was chosen to serve as the pilot region. DMHAS' Southeastern Mental Health Authority is administering the regional pilot initiative.

The grant also requires completion of a comprehensive planning process over the first 6 to 8 months that must result in the direct submission of a strategic plan to SAMHSA. Per federal grant requirement, actual jail diversion services will commence once the plan has been approved by SAMHSA's Center for Mental Health Services. Our strategic plan will be supported by a Memorandum of Understanding that we anticipate will be signed by at least 15 state, federal, and community agencies, including the Veterans' Health Administration (VA CT Healthcare

System), the Veterans' Benefits Administration (VA Regional Office), and the VA Veterans' Readjustment and Counseling Service (Vet Centers).

To accomplish the strategic planning process, DMHAS has convened local and state advisory boards that are comprised of veterans with trauma-related histories and involvement in the criminal justice system, representatives from the federal and state Departments of Veterans' Affairs, the Judicial Department, the Chief State's Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, the Vet Center System, the state Departments of Labor, Social Services and Correction, and several other affected organizations. The goal of the planning process is to establish a formal structure that will, at the earliest opportunity, divert veterans with trauma-related symptoms from the criminal justice system to a seamless system of treatment and recovery support services.

Similar to the Military Support Program (MSP), Connecticut's Jail Diversion Program for Veterans is an example of the community coming together. In effect, this program will link together 3 discreet systems—the VA, DMHAS, and the Judicial System — and in so doing we will be establishing a new social structure exclusively for veterans, an example of the community assisting them to make the transition back to productive lives in the community following their experience in war.

We believe that this grant and the process outlined in it will be a successful model for moving to a statewide veterans' jail diversion program in Connecticut. We also believe that our success in southeastern Connecticut has the potential to lead to some federal dollars for expansion of the program statewide. In these tough economic times, if there is federal money available to implement important programs, we believe that is the strategy we should pursue.

We therefore ask the Judiciary Committee to wait on H.B. 6708 at this time, and to follow the development of the federally funded jail diversion program for veterans currently in active planning. We expect the strategic plan to be completed and approved by SAMHSA by the end of the summer. This comprehensive program will help inform the future advisability or need for a specific veterans' court. It would be helpful for the legislature to have the benefit of this work before launching a parallel process, the expense for which would be borne entirely by the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the Committee on H.B. 6078 and our efforts thus far related to a Pretrial Diversion Program for Veterans.